BBSRC, EPSRC & MRC: Enhancing your chance of success

The following tips have been shared at Grants Academy *Funder Insights* sessions by University of Aberdeen colleagues who sit on BBSRC, EPSRC or MRC funding panels or are recent recipients of awards from these funders.

BE STRATEGIC

- **What does your funder want to fund? "remember they won't fund your favourite project" (UoA MRC awardee)** - UKRI funders' strategic priorities are set out in their [delivery plans](#) and the priorities of each UKRI funding Panel/Board are listed on their respective webpages. It is recommended these are taken into account when preparing your bid. Some funders, e.g. BBSRC, publish minutes from Strategy Advisory Panel meetings which may indicate future funding priorities 2-3 years ahead of calls;
- **Make the most of your (and your co-Is) networks** – be proactive in seeking intelligence on calls (and consider sharing this with R&I who may have other relevant information that they can pass back to you);
- **Speak to the funder early** to make sure your ideas align with what they are looking for – programme managers are there to help and happy to be contacted – *UKRI have regularly fed back to UoA that our PIs do not make the most of this opportunity*.

TAKE TIME TO GET YOUR IDEAS RIGHT

- **Engage colleagues as 'critical friends' in discussing plans early** – doing this before you start to write can help ensure research questions are framed appropriately, the right methods will be applied and you are working with the most appropriate collaborators – it will be difficult to address fundamental issues in these areas once an application has been drafted;
- **If you're not ready to submit - *DON'T!* -** waiting to the next deadline may improve your chance of success. A large proportion of our successful UoA awardees deferred earlier planned submissions (sometimes just a couple of weeks before a deadline) in order to address issues and finesse their proposal – in these cases the PIs told us they felt the grant may not have been funded otherwise;
- **Be familiar with resubmission rules** – this may impact when you decide to submit;
- **Find out first hand why grants succeed or fail** – seek out and speak to a member of the funding panel you are targeting – panel membership is published; you (or your co-Is) may know someone on the panel.

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UKRI WILL ONLY FUND EXCELLENT SCIENCE

- **Any flaws in your approach will be spotted** – all UKRI proposals must be underpinned by scientific excellence – this is essential;
- **Be ambitious and innovative** - also be realistic about highlighting any risks and planned mitigation of these.

MAKE THE MOST OF INTERNAL SUPPORT

- **Plan ahead** – there is a considerable support available to UoA staff planning UKRI applications (see appendix). Get the most from this by building it into your timescales;
- **"Take peer review seriously" (UoA MRC awardee)** – seek out reviewers who will be tough and honest– this is how UKRI panel members and expert reviewers will approach reviewing your bid;
- **Seek comments on your rebuttal** – although the turnaround time for responding will be short, try to seek input from others - including your peer reviewers;
- **Give R&I time to read your final application** – a fresh pair of eyes can spot things others have missed – you may need time to respond to any issues that are identified.

PRELIMINARY DATA

- **Does your pilot data justify your approach?** If it doesn't this will be spotted and is often cited as a reason for rejection. If necessary, delay your submission and focus on collection of further pilot data. Make use of internal sources of funding if appropriate;
- **After submission keep generating data** – this may be useful in your rebuttal.

READ THE GUIDANCE

- **Read the current guidance documents** – this includes the funding guide and any supplementary documents for specific calls. You need to make sure you understand what the call is seeking and if you can match the expectations;
- **Where requested use headings provided by the funder**;
- **Ensure all the requested elements of the application are carefully addressed**;
- **Avoid your application being returned** - ensure font size, line spacing and margins are as specified by the funder. Do not exceed word counts, page lengths etc.

WHO AM I WRITING FOR?

- **Write for *everyone* who will read your proposal -** Funding Panel Chairs, Introducing Members, other panel members and expert reviewers. Take into account that some of these will spend more time reading your bid than others and with variable knowledge of your scientific area;
- **Consider some readers may only ever read your Je-S form** e.g. Panel Chairs, some panel members.

HELP YOUR REVIEWERS - MAKE YOUR APPLICATION EASY TO READ!

- **Remember, typically, panels only spend around 8 minutes discussing each bid**;
- **Use headings and spaces between paragraphs** - can be analogous to a 'highlighter pen' to help readers navigate to what they are looking for quickly – could be particularly helpful to an Introducing Member defending your application at a panel;
- **Convey the novelty of the research and your expertise and enthusiasm** – try and do this in the opening paragraph of the Case for Support;
- **Consider including a schematic summary** near the start of your Case for Support
- **Use plain English** - if the inclusion of acronyms or technical terminology is needed explain the terms in full;
- **Give each section a structure and stick to it**! E.g. Work Packages: use bullet points, introduce with lay language and end with a statement of expected impact.
- **Ensure your Lay Summary is lay** and give it a start, a middle and an end. Do not use technical language but if you do - explain it! Set out why the research is required;
- **Consider ending the Case for Support with an experimental outlook** to outline your other research plans outside this proposal;
- **Check content AND presentation** – spelling, grammar and punctuation are important;
- **Consider justified text may appear dense** and harder to read;
- **Consider the balance between sections** – it is common to include too much detail on methods at the cost of other sections and this may detract from readability.

DON'T GET DISHEARTENED

- **Unfortunately competitive grants don't always get funded** - UKRI project grant success rate are around 20-25% and all successful PIs will have had rejections. Don't give up, take on board any feedback and consider consulting with senior staff and R&I to help plan how to take your research ideas forward. Remember to check resubmission rules if you plan to resubmit.

APPENDIX: SCHOOL AND GRANTS ACADEMY SUPPORT FOR COLLEAGUES APPLYING TO UKRI

- **SENIOR STAFF SUPPORT -** Institute Directors, Research Leads, School Directors of Research and Programme Leads are happy to speak to colleagues at any stage to discuss their research ideas and application plans.
- **SETTING ASIDE DEFINED GRANT WRITING TIME -** writing a high-quality grant proposal takes a substantial stretch of interruption-free time, always at a premium in any University working day! Consider looking at your teaching calendar across the year, identifying potential 1-2 month gaps free of teaching responsibility, and reserving that time for grant planning and writing. Explore whether you can create such a gap with the help of colleagues and course organisers, who may be willing to re-distribute your marking, or isolated lectures, allowing you to focus on the grant.
- **PILOT DATA -** a number of internal/external funding sources support the generation of pilot data to under pin larger grants. Please also contact R&I for advice.
- **GRANTS FOUNDRY -** consider approaching the School/Grants Academy to arrange an informal 'Grants Foundry' discussion to support the early development of your ideas.
- **SUPPORTING GRANTS APPLICATION (SGA) INTENTION TO SUBMIT (ITS)** – this is most helpful 3-4 months ahead of deadline. Please contact your R&I Business Development Officer and follow your School/Institute ITS/SGA process.
- **GRANT REVIEW MEETING** – can usually be arranged on request, with sufficient notice, either ahead of submission (to enable a finalised application to be discussed with senior colleagues) or following an unsuccessful bid (to help plan your strategy moving forward).
- **PEER REVIEW** – peer reviewers will be identified at the SGA/ITS panel and/or by the School. However, you are encouraged to seek as many views as possible on your proposal to help you prepare a competitive bid.
- **INTERVIEW PREPARATION** – should you be invited to a panel interview as part of the application then the Grants Academy can arrange a mock panel to be convened to pose questions and provide constructive feedback on responses.
- **FELLOWSHIPS** – should follow Fellowship Support Process – please contact Grants Academy.
- **UKRI BOOTCAMP** – run by the Grants Academy for colleagues nominated by Head of Institute/School who are planning to submit to UKRI in the next 12 months.
- **LIBRARY OF FUNDED GRANTS** – held by the Grants Academy - can be shared on request.
- **UKRI AND OTHER FUNDER UOA PANEL MEMBERSHIP** – can be shared by the Grants Academy.
- **IMPAC**T - the Impact and Knowledge Exchange team can review draft proposals to help develop impact plans, enhance prominence of impact and develop public engagement plans.
- **DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN (DMP)** – the Grants Academy and the Digital Research team can help advise on DMPs.
- **ETHICS** – although most applications do not require formal ethics approval, any issues should be discussed with the School Ethics Officer (Research Governance Team for SMMSN staff undertaking clinical studies) in case any additional guidance is needed prior to submission.